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INSIDE

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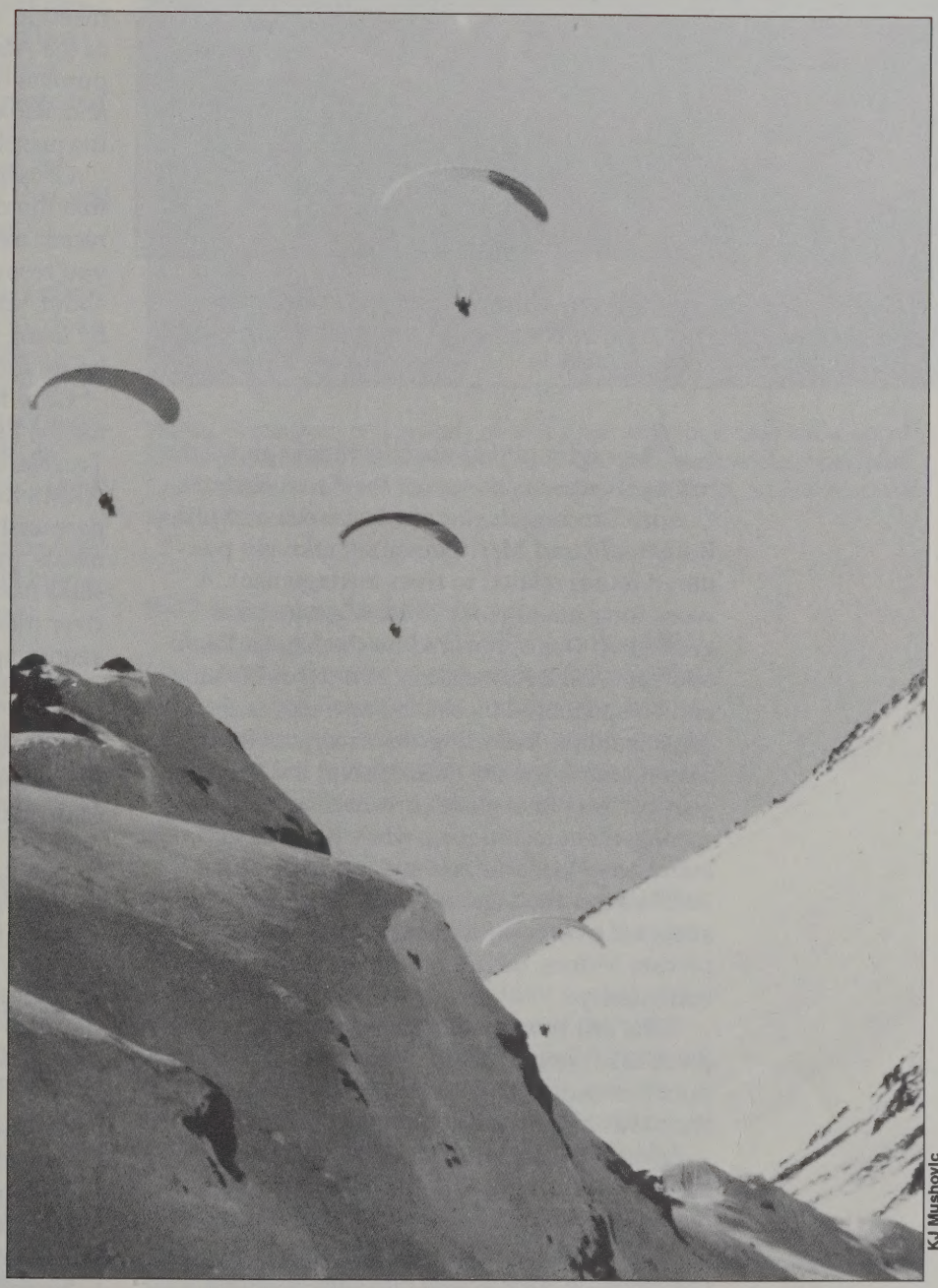
Ducks Unlimited and BLM link computer software with satellite images to map waterfowl habitat

American River Management Society workshop yields a stream of ideas

Village students get a close look at the Alaska Fire Service



KJ Mushovic

Paragliders enjoy a unique view of the World Extreme Skiing Championship competition, floating above the Richardson Highway near Thompson Pass.

u.s. department of the interior • bureau of land management

BLMers flex their ARMS

Ideas float at American River Management Society workshop

KJ Mushovic

Bunny Sterin, Jake Schlapfer, Kathy O'Reilly-Doyle, and LuVerne Grussing discussed river management strategies at a workshop on the Kenai River.

As eagles glided unconcernedly above the roiling, turquoise waters of the Kenai River at Cooper Landing during the last week of April, Bureau of Land Management employees pondered issues related to river management. A week-long Interagency River Management Workshop was sponsored by the Alaska Recreation and Park Association, Wildland Division, and co-sponsored by several agencies and organizations, including the American River Management Society (ARMS) and the BLM. Its purpose was to explore current river issues and management techniques, while promoting interagency cooperation and consistency in Alaska river management. The workshop attracted over 60 attendees from public and private sectors, including the Alaska Native community.

"The last river management meeting we had (in Alaska) was in 1981," comments BLM outdoor recreation planner Paul Boos. "This workshop was long overdue."

Many BLMers who attended are also members of ARMS, and a special ARMS meeting was held one evening after workshop sessions had ended. Nationally, ARMS members include managers, academic and other researchers, conservation organizations, outfitters and interested individuals, providing a forum for sharing information on use and management of river resources. BLM is well-represented in the national organization and in the Alaska chapter, which is the only chapter to consist of a single state. Although just one year old, it is already the third-largest of the seven U.S. chapters.

National ARMS President LuVerne Grussing attended both the workshop and the ARMS meeting, and observed that the size and activity of the Alaska chapter is related to "... the large number of (river) resources and issues in Alaska, and also to the enthusiasm and commitment of the people involved."

Grussing, who works at BLM in Idaho, added that the skills bank was included in the most recent membership directory. "If there is an issue you're working on that you want to know more about, you can reference the bank by subject or by using the name of someone you think may know something more about it."

Gary Marsh, river management program lead for the BLM's Washington Office, and an ARMS Trustee, also attended the Alaska workshop and ARMS meeting. "ARMS supports many river partnership projects through assistance agreements, maintains a river expertise computer skills bank for members, and provides in-depth river management training opportunities for agency and organizational employees."

BLM hydrologist Bunny Sterin acknowledges that, " ... [while] a lot of our issues (in Alaska) are different from those in the lower 48, many issues are similar, and can be studied to gain information that can prevent re-inventing the wheel."

Rivers may not be manageable in the strictest sense of the word, but through organizations like ARMS, those who care about rivers can acquire the tools and relationships to ensure better management of river resources.

—KJ Mushovic

For more information on ARMS membership and activities near you, contact Jake Schlapfer, President of the Alaska Chapter of ARMS, 6881 Abbott Loop Road, Anchorage, Alaska, 99507. Outside of Alaska, contact the Secretary, P.O. Box 621911, Littleton, CO 80162, (303) 973-4212.

It's a RAP!

—RAPS students from Koyukuk and Deering use their skills to produce interpretive slide show

The studio director nodded his head and the needles on the recording console began to dance with the voice of the narrator.

"Welcome to the Seward Peninsula. Located just below the Arctic Circle, it neighbors Asia by only 58 ocean miles to the west. Here, the first human immigrants are believed to have stepped from one continent to the other 20,000 years ago."

It looked and sounded like a Hollywood production, but the voice was that of Harley Huntington, an 18-year-old Athabascan from the cillage of Koyukuk, and the script was prepared by members of the BLM's Kobuk District.

They produced a 15-minute slide show, entitled "Seward Peninsula Nature Walk," that will be shown at the BLM field office in None, in classrooms and to other groups.

Randi Jandt, wildlife biologist with the Kobuk District, said the slide show is designed to give a fundamental understanding of the tundra ecosystem. "We try to give the viewer some tidbits of information that might be interesting enough for them to remember when they actually encounter that plant or animal on their own," Jandt said.

The goal is enhanced appreciation and understanding of this ecosystem so visitors will enjoy their hiking, driving or floating experience more," she said.

Work on the slide show began in 1992 when Jandt brought the idea to Lorraine Jeanes, a school teacher from California who worked as a volunteer. Jeanes systematically collected slides, mostly from the wildlife staff and others in BLM, and prepared a first draft of the script. Mark Handley, a forestry technician with the Alaska Fire Service, revised the script and polished it into its final form.

The project drew heavily on the services of the Resource Apprenticeship Program for Students. Walter Gregg, an Inupiat RAPS student from Deering with good local knowledge of the plants and wildlife of the Seward Peninsula, reviewed the script and slides for accuracy. Huntington, who worked three years in the RAPS program, provided the narration.

The work was also fun, according to Huntington. He worked in the recording studio with Dan Gullickson, audio-visual specialist for BLM in Fairbanks. The Tanana Chiefs Conference provided funds for his travel and housing through the Job Training Partnership Act.

Andy Williams

Harley Huntington, of Koyukuk, provides narration for a slide show about plants and wildlife on the Seward Peninsula. BLM audio-visual specialist Dan Gullickson records the narration, while Randi Jandt, natural resource specialist, provides pointers.

Huntington began as a RAPS student in 1990. He spent his first summer working on cadastral surveys in the Tanana Flats and the next two years working on wildlife studies on the Seward Peninsula. Last summer he worked with the Alaska Fire Service as a member of the North Star Fire Crew

The Resource Apprenticeship Program for Students helps Alaska Native youth combat the high dropout rates and unemployment in rural Alaska.

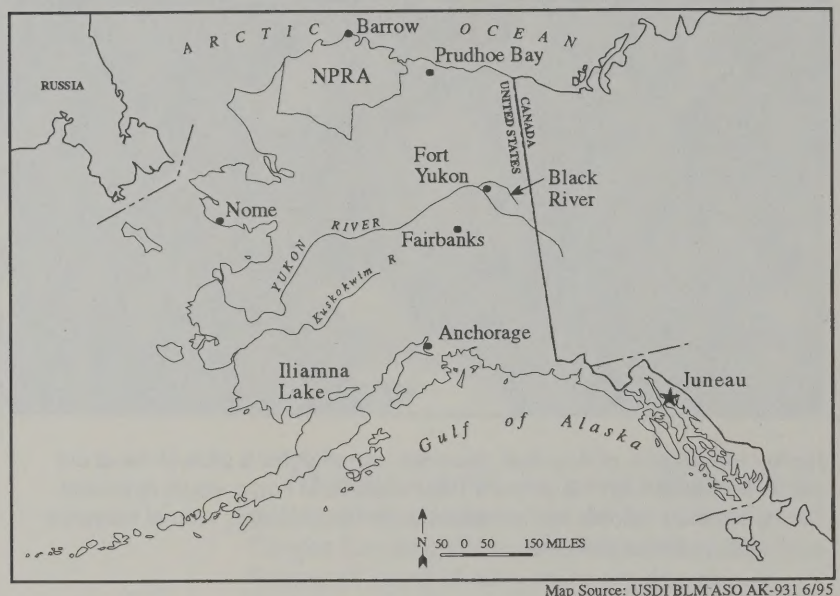
Jon Deininger, RAPS coordinator for the state, says the 1995 season has been one of the most challenging in terms of coordination. "But even with staff reductions in host agencies and declining funds for youth programs," Deininger says, "this summer's RAPS program should have about 50 participants."

"I recommend the RAPS program to a lot of kids," Huntington said. "Working with the professionals and seeing what they d—it really gives you a feel for what BLM does."

—Andy Williams

Creating new images of the Arctic

New software plus satellite imagery makes identifying wetlands and waterfowl habitat easier



Map Source: USDI BLM ASO AK-931 6/95

John Payne

The remoteness and complexity of the wetlands on the North Slope lends itself to the use of satellite imagery.

Along the coastline of the Arctic Ocean between Icy Cape and Teshekpuk Lake, lays the Arctic Coastal Plain, containing one of the largest and most stable collections of wetlands in North America. These wetlands support large numbers of breeding and post breeding loons, shorebirds, gulls, terns and waterfowl, including the federally listed spectacled and Stellar's eiders. The heightened interest in onshore oil development means land managers have made gathering natural resources data in this area a top priority.

A new tool, Habitat Inventory and Evaluation Software, is being used with satellite imagery to identify wetlands and waterfowl habitat here and in other areas in Alaska. The work is part of an ongoing project by Ducks Unlimited, Inc. and the Bureau of Land Management to generate a wetlands ecosystem database for BLM lands in the state.

John Payne, a BLM wildlife biologist, says Alaska was an ideal location for testing the new technology. "BLM has extensive wetlands under its jurisdiction in Alaska, including some very large, unbroken tracts of land. A Cooperative Agreement between DU and BLM was developed five years ago to systematically inventory those wetlands," says Payne.

The Arctic Coastal Plain is particularly difficult to evaluate because of its many wetland basins, lack of roads, rapidly changing weather conditions and numerous days with cloud cover. The interspersed tundra habitats are used by caribou, brown bear, polar bear, foxes, lemmings, ptarmigan, passerines and raptors. The king eider migration alone has been estimated at one million birds passing Point Barrow.

Testing the software began in 1991 in the Black River area in eastern Alaska. Location information from Global Positioning Systems was added to increase mapping accuracy. The addition of a custom data collection form that standardized field techniques was used in further testing near Lake Iliamna in 1992.

In 1994 a full capability test covering some eight million acres was conducted in the National Petroleum Reserve on Alaska's north slope. The work at NPR-A provided the opportunity to try new computer hardware that links the satellite

image to GPS locations, while being mobile in a helicopter.

Payne says the field work starts with a crew spending a full day on the ground doing classification.

"Everyone has the same type of view," says Payne. "Then they use a helicopter with a pilot and a navigator who runs the GPS equipment, which helps them identify their location, and interprets the field map. A vegetation specialist gives information to a field recorder who verifies the vegetation composition and records land cover type percentages and other data on a field form. The helicopter hovers about 200 feet above the ground."

"Low-level helicopter surveys are a very effective method of field data collection," says Payne, "since a much broader area can be covered quickly as well as remote areas that are difficult to access."

Payne explains, "High-level aerial photos taken of the site are digitized and used as ground reference with satellite images. Each satellite image covers some eight million acres and is able to identify wetland types greater than 30 meters in size."

The software produces red, green, and blue images that resemble the color infrared photographs produced by the high level aerial photos. Water features that are bluish in tone indicate the presence of sedimentation; in Alaska, many of the large rivers carry a heavy load of glacial flour, or silt, which causes turbidity. Black or darker tones indicate wetlands that consist of clearer, or less turbid water. Growing broadleaf vegetation such as annual grasses or deciduous trees appear orange-red, and yellow-green tones are tundra habitats. The white round features are popcorn clouds.

Payne says that one of the advantages of the new technology is the savings in costs. "The biggest value of the software is that it allows large scale classification of waterfowl habitat for approximately three cents per acre. Normal ground methods cost about $3,000 per acre, and costs are much higher in Alaska where accessibility is a major obstacle."

—Janet Malone

John Payne

Each field crew spends several hours training on the ground before beginning the helicopter site visits.

John Payne

Helicopters offer access to remote areas otherwise inaccessible.

Extremely Exciting!

Winter sports enthusiasts gather to compete on extreme terrain

KJ Mushovic

A tired "boarder" completes a demanding course during the King of the Hill snowboarding competition.

About the time the clocks are turned forward for daylight savings time, the rest of the country may be enjoying green grass and spring flowers, but Alaska still has an abundance of snow. Make that snow and mountains, complete with the destructive signs of avalanches evident along the Tiekel and Tsina river valleys in the Glennallen District.

Road signs bearing the warning, "Avalanche Area Next 7 1/2 Miles—DO NOT STOP!" might cause the fainthearted to turn back. However, there are daring breeds of outdoor enthusiasts who find the spring combination of snow, mountains, above-freezing temperatures and longer, stronger daylight extremely appealing, and they come from all over the world to play on both State of Alaska and Bureau of Land Management lands.

In early April, the fifth annual world Extreme Skiing Championships, fourth annual Mountain Man Hillclimb snowmachine event, and second annual King and Queen of the Hill snowboarding competition all took place in the vicinity of Thompson Pass, along the Richardson Highway.

"It's a real world party," exclaimed one WESC spectator, enjoying the mix of accents and languages throughout the throngs of competition participants, spectators, and those who came to take part in their own favorite winter activity. A steady stream of snowmachiners, skiers, snowboarders, sledders, and paragliders traversed the area.

WESC executive director Christine Hunt bustled happily about, answering questions from volunteer workers and spectators, while rifling through paperwork associated with the BLM Special Recreation Use permit for the event. BLM public lands are available for the public to use in the enjoyment of their favorite winter sport. Organized, competitive events which take place on BLM-managed lands, however, do require Special Recreation Use permits.

"It's just great to see this all come together," beamed Hunt. "I've been working on this for a year, and I was just now laying back on a snowmachine in the sunshine and enjoying seeing it finally happening!"

"He really got some good air," one enthusiastic spectator exclaimed, watching through binoculars as a snowboarder made a daring leap off a cliff, high above.

"I was, like, rag dollin' it (out of control) in the air three times on my way down. I'm lucky I made it without falling," panted one competitor at the bottom of the run.

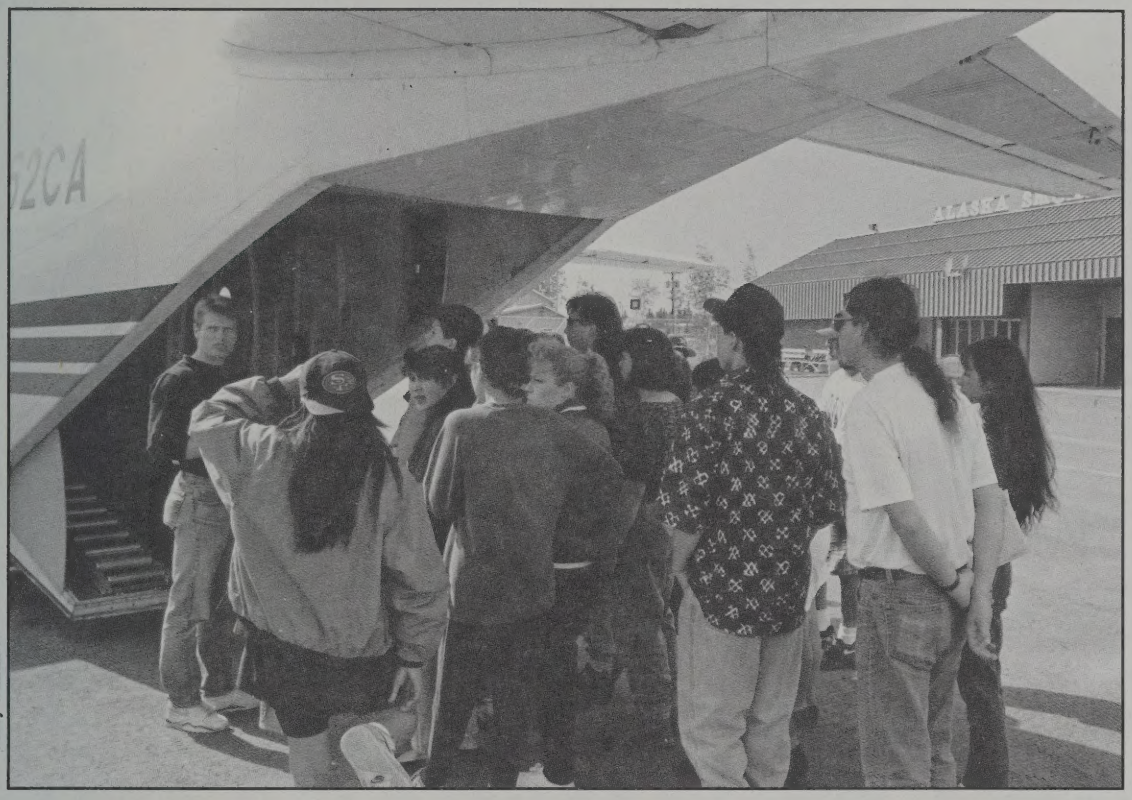
Julie Zell, of Jackson Hole, Wyoming, grimaced as she unbuckled herself from her board and reached over to fill a plastic bag with snow. "I was so slow—and I crashed," she lamented, as she stuffed the snow-filled bag inside her clothing to soothe a tender spot. "I'm hurt so bad." When asked if she had gotten hurt during the competition, the 1994 Queen of the Hill replied that she had fallen and hit a rock before traveling to Alaska. Why compete if she was hurt so badly?

"To defend my championship. I've always been the underdog, but here … I was the champ," Zell explained, limping toward the shuttle van that would take her to an aircraft, then back to the top of the mountain for yet one more run. Zell's determination paid off, and won her the right to retain her title for another year.

—KJ Mushovic

Editor's note: If you enjoy winter recreation, please become aware of the safety precautions recommended for your favorite activity. An injury in a remote location can be life-threatening, as help or rescue is not readily available. Avalanches and crevasses also pose a very real danger!

Village students tour AFS



Andy Williams

AFS smokejumper Gene Stone shows students the Casa 212, which flies smokejumpers to wildfires where they parachute down to provide initial attack efforts.

Kenneth Pitka eyed the tan, Kevlar-knit uniform on the table at the smokejumpers facility at the Alaska Fire Service.

"That's a new design we worked on through the winter," said Jim Raudenbush, a smokejumper. "Here, do you want to get into it?"

The eighth-grader from the village of Beaver quickly positioned himself and with Raudenbush's help, put on the outfit. The suit is made out of the same puncture-resistant material used to make bullet-proof vests and is designed to protect the firefighters when they parachute out of airplanes. Head to toe, the boy looked and felt like a smokejumper.

About 20 students from the school in Beaver visited AFS recently. AFS also hosted a visit by students in Fairbanks School District's Native Youth Leadership Program.

Dave Jandt, leader of the hotshot crews, described operations at AFS. Most of the students had family members or friends who had worked as emergency firefighters. One of the students from Beaver had applied for a position on the hotshot crews.

The students visited the Alaska Interagency Fire Coordination Center, where fire suppression is coordinated on a statewide basis. They gathered at the map behind the dispatch console and eagerly asked questions about locations on the map, and the meanings of arrows and other magnetic markers used in plotting and responding to fires. AIFCC Coordinator Tom Dean and Logistics Coordinator Dave Curry described how the operations work and answered questions.

Roger Delaney, natural resource specialist with the Arctic District, also talked to students and their teachers about BLM activities. He urged students to sign up with the Resource Apprenticeship Program for Students, which provided opportunities to more than 50 youths from rural areas to work with BLM professionals last year.

At the smokejumper base, the students from Beaver saw how smokejumpers pack parachutes and carry their gear to fires. Raudenbush said only experienced firefighters, who are hard workers and are in top physical shape, are picked to be smokejumpers.

Based on the look in young Pitka's eyes as he emerged from the smokejumper's suit, at least one application may be coming from Beaver in the next few years.

—Andy Williams

frontier flashes

An area of approximately 1,800 acres at the Russian and Kenai River confluence will be under review during the summer by the Bureau of Land Management for potential transfer to Cook Inlet Region, Inc.

CIRI has selected land at the popular recreation area under a provision of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 that allows Native regional corporations to gain title to existing cemetery sites and historical places. To date, 962.6 acres along both sides of the Russian and Kenai Rivers have been certified by the Bureau of Indian Affairs to have such cultural resources. CIRI initially filed four applications with BLM prior to the 1976 deadline, and later filed amendments to the original application. In January CIRI requested that BLM adjudicate their claims.

Over the next few months, BLM will make a determination of how much of the selected area is available, timeliness of selections, and what public access easements across the lands are necessary. In addition, a decision will be made on whether or not a waiver from the Secretary of the Interior is required for selections filed after the 1976 deadline.

Lands owned by private individuals or by the State of Alaska are not affected by the application or transfer of cemetery or historical sites. Site selections can be taken only from federal lands open for that purpose.

While the Russian-Kenai River confluence is a highly popular and heavily-used recreation area, this has no legal standing in the decision-making process.

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The Bering Glacier has awakened after a long winter's sleep and resumed its dramatic surge towards the Gulf of Alaska. Glaciologists from the U.S. Geological Survey had believed that the Bering had stopped its advance after a major outburst flood on July 29, 1994. However, on May 1, 1995 a very large piece of ice calved off into Vitus Lake indicating the glacier was active once again. The lake is now completely filled with ice and is close to being cut in half by the ice movement. Observers have noted some new rivers being formed with high velocity water creating shoreline erosion exceeding 30 feet per day.

In recent years, the lakes around the Bering Glacier have become a popular area for kayaking and some hiking. The public and tour operators are being urged to avoid the area as there is a significant danger associated with the unstable icebergs and the rapid, unpredictable releases of huge volumes of water exploding from the face of the glacier. Last summer more than 100 square miles were flooded by the trapped waters of Berg Lake.

The glacier has surged about one-and-a-half to four miles towards the ocean and now stands poised at the forelands, a narrow strip of land that is the last barrier between the glacier and the ocean. If the glacier reaches the sea, the massive icebergs could threaten tanker traffic traveling to and from the Valdez oil terminal.

One of the major concerns for biologists is the fate of the dusky geese that use the area for nesting at this time of year. There are only about 7,000 to 9,000 geese left, and about eight percent of them tried to nest on islands in front of the glacier last summer. These islands were overrun by the ice last month, forcing the geese to the forelands which now also are threatened. It isn't known what impact this will have on the duskys in the long term. In addition to the glacier taking habitat, this spring has been exceptionally cold, which will further reduce nesting success.

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